

ARCHIE AND THE LITTLE PEOPLE

Scotland

There once was a crofter and his wife in the West Highlands of Scotland. They kept some sheep and some goats and had a daughter and a son. The parents loved the son most because he was the youngest. And the father took the wee lad with him everywhere he went, leaving the daughter behind. Naturally, this made the wee girl jealous of her brother, because she loved her daddy very much. The mother paid no attention to her daughter except to tell her to clean the house and fetch the water and be careful not to spill it.

Time passed as it always does and the mother and father died and the croft was left to the son and daughter. But as the daughter was older, she maintained that she was the owner and the boss. Although the young brother took care of the sheep and goats and worked the farm, nothing he did pleased his sister.

He would come home from working hard on the farm and she would fling his food on the table with a growly, "Here's your supper." The boy's name was Archie, and he soon got used to this treatment. His sister ordered him about every day. "Archie, take your boots off. Archie, fetch some water and be careful not to spill it." Poor Archie did all that his sister asked, because she was older than he. He could not make any friends because she would not let him go out anywhere.

Time passed and Archie grew up to be a fine lad of twenty-five. But still his sister ordered him about like a servant. Nothing he could do pleased her. Since her father and mother had given her no affection, she took it out on poor Archie with no letup. Every day she put a bottle of milk and a piece of bread and cheese in a bag, and said, "Git out ta the hill and take care of the sheep." And off he would go with his two collie dogs.

Archie took it all with a good heart, for he was a kind soul. He never said a word, but was glad to go up to his room early every evening to get rid of her. His sole pleasure was playing his penny whistle, so softly that she could not hear.

One morning on the first of May, Archie took his bread and milk and he and his dogs went off to take care of the sheep. For half a day he herded, cleaned, and clipped them. At noon he sat down by a large rock he had seen many a time but never stopped to rest.

He sat in the shade and shared his lunch with his dogs. In a moment, he was surrounded by dozens of little people. The dogs yipped and ran away! The little people climbed onto his lap, on his knees, on his shoulders, and peeked into his ears and pulled his hair.

All of a sudden another little fellow showed up and said, "Leave him alone. Come down here and behave yourselves."

Archie looked up and saw a most handsome wee man with a crown on his head. "Hello, Archie," he said.

Archie rubbed his eyes. He thought he might be sleeping.

The king said, "Archie, you have to leave this place."

"Why? Who are you?"

"Oh, Archie, you ought to know who we are. 'Tis May 1st, and we're the fairy folk. Today is the day for our party."

"Oh, don't send me away. I'm so lonely."

"We know," said the little man. "Your sister rules your life."

Another little fellow came up, rolling a small barrel. He pried off the lid. "Here. Have a drink of this."

Archie took a swallow, and there was the most warm feeling crawling through his body. He felt like he was floating on a cloud. "I have never enjoyed anything like this before," said Archie. Gone was the thought of his sister, gone the thought of his dogs and sheep, gone was the thought of everything.

"Oh, you like our way of life, do ye?" said the wee king.

"Oh, aye!" And Archie pulled out his penny whistle and began to play a tune that was as happy as he now felt. And the fairy folk began to clap and laugh and dance.

When he was done, the king clapped his hands and said, "Oh, Archie, you make the grandest music!" Those were the first kind words the poor lad had heard since his mother and father had died. He had never been so happy. So he played another and when that was done, the little people were shouting and clapping. "Give us more, Archie!"

So Archie sat with his feet stretched out, leaning against the rock while the wee folk danced and laughed and clapped and told him what a fine fellow he was and wasn't it lucky he hadn't gone away when they had asked him to. Archie felt he was in the finest company he'd ever had in his life.

The wee folk brought another barrel and then another. Archie danced and drank and played and the hours passed by. To Archie it seemed only five minutes. The sun rolled down in the sky till it was six o'clock and Archie's sister wondered. "Where is that no-good brother of mine?"

The king said, "Archie, that was lovely, but I'll tell you something. Your sister is getting worried and we don't want to get ye into trouble."

Archie stood and wobbled a bit. He said, "I'll be back!"

The king hollered after him, "Ye'd better hurry up because it's a long time till May first next year!"

By the time he'd gotten home it was seven o'clock and Archie knew the fairy folk would only be there until midnight. Then it would be a full year till his wee friends appeared again. And he said to himself, "It's five hours till midnight. Is it gonna be five hours with that sister of mine, or five hours with the little people?"

When he walked into the farmhouse he was in a great state of contentment. But when the dogs saw him, they hid under the table with their ears hanging down.

"Where have you been?" said his sister.

"I have been with my friends." Archie was not afraid of her any more.

"Do you know what time it is?"

"Of course."

"Have you been drinking?"

"Of course. I've been drinking and making music and dancing with the dearest friends I've ever had. I've seen the light of the world. I've been among the little people."

"So 'tis the little people that have done this to you! Rue be upon you! Your supper is cold, but I'll not be warming it for you."

"Rue be upon you!" says Archie. "You can keep your supper and you can keep your farm. I have four hours till twelve o'clock and I am gonna spend it with them that cares about me!"

And with that he turned and went out, slamming the door. Back he went to the hill and joined the little people. Glad they were to see him, too. "Play us another tune, Archie," they begged. "Have another drink," they offered. "You're a good lad, Archie," they said, sitting all around him and perching on his shoulders while he played and danced.

And they all had a grand party till midnight. But when the second of May came, Archie was gone. His sister waited and waited, but Archie was never seen again in this world.